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South Sioux residents hit by foul odors; city leaders search for solution

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SOUTH SIOUX CITY, Neb. | A "horrible and toxic" odor tied to a sewage backup in South Sioux City has forced some residents to leave their homes.

Lance Hedquist, South Sioux City administrator, said the sewage odor is coming from 15 houses in a five-block vicinity of Red Bird Lane to Lemasa Drive to 39th and 32nd streets. He estimates 40 people live in that neighborhood.

Hedquist said there's also a "horrific" odor coming from the Big Ox Energy plant, which recently started up operations at 1617 Dakota Ave. in the city's Roth Industrial Park. The plant is about 2 miles from the affected houses.

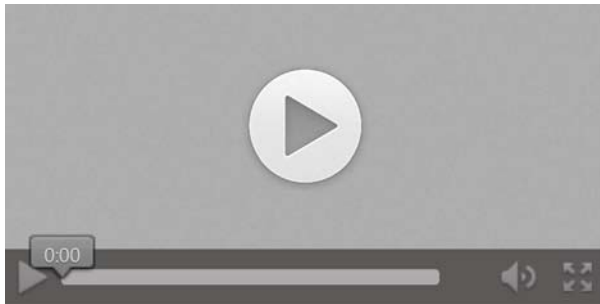
Big Ox, a Denmark, Wisconsin-based renewable energy firm, converts organic industrial waste into methane gas.

"How they are tied together, I can't totally tell you," Hedquist said Friday of the new plant and the homes, which share the same sewer line.

Rob Baker, a resident in one of the houses affected in the 3800 block of G Street, said the smell started three weeks ago. He initially thought it was just an isolated incident.

"I contacted my plumber. I thought it had to do with my house, but (the plumber) said, 'Oh no, this is a larger problem,'" Baker said. "What it is called is a backflow pressure problem. There is something that is blowing pressure through the city's sewer system, and it is blowing through our house and out of the vent stacks."

Baker described it as a "horrible and toxic" sewer smell that caused him and his family to evacuate for the weekend.



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FYI - Baker declined to have a free plumbing inspection done in November that would have included a smoke test -ptm

"This morning at 5 o'clock it woke us up. We were coughing and choking -- it's toxic," Baker said, adding the smell is also noticeable outdoors. "We just are not going to live there until this gets fixed."

Hedquist said, to his knowledge, one other person has left their home because of the smell. He also said another person claimed the odor made them physically ill.

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Hedquist said building inspectors have looked at 10 of the affected houses. He said work will continue Saturday to find a resolution. He believes the problem is from faulty traps in plumbing drains that are designed to stop sewage odors from coming out of them.

"They have found places where they found dry traps that have allowed that gas to come in," Hedquist said. "It is extremely unusual to have 15 houses in the same area having the same problem. That just doesn't make any sense at all from that standpoint."

However, Baker said the odor is coming through traps that are properly working.

South Sioux City leaders have hailed the arrival of Big Ox Energy, which built a more than \$30 million plant that is expected to create 25 to 30 jobs. The company's anaerobic digestion process extracts organic nutrients from animal, grain and other waste to create methane. The clean-burning fuel is then sold into the natural gas pipeline.

Big Ox officials could not immediately be reached for comment late Friday.

The Journal's Nick Hytrek contributed to this story.



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